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Books of The Times

The Book We Wanted in the First Place

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

ONLY ONE YEAR. By Svetlana Alliluyeva. Translated from the Russian by Paul Chavchavadze. 444 pages. Harper & Row. $7.95.

SVETLANA ALLILUYEVA'S first book, "Twenty Letters to a Friend," was simply overwhelmed by events. We were so thunderstruck by the appearance in our midst of this alien, smiling creature that nothing less than a full explanation of her presence would do. How had the daughter of Joseph Stalin gotten here? What was it like where she had come from? How did it compare with where she was now? But instead of a response to such questions, Miss Alliluyeva offered us a subjective memoir of family life written four years earlier and addressed to a Soviet audience. To American readers, its quaint lyricism seemed almost monstrously naive; its subjectivity, distorting; and its datedness, frustrating. As she herself now says, "A family chronicle just could not satisfy at such a moment." So the excitement of her arrival passed, and she retired to Princeton, N. J. When the news got around that she had written a second book, no one much cared.

Christopher S. Cushman

Svetlana Alliluyeva

But surprisingly—yet, if one stops to think about it, quite logically—that book turns out to be the one we hoped for in the first place.

"Only One Year" is several books. It is a memory of the Russia she left behind her. It is the appraisal of her father and his political consorts that was missing from "Twenty Letters." It is a full report of her impressions of America. It is a tender memorial to the man whose death precipitated the year's extraordinary happenings. And it is a dramatic account of the adventure that brought her to America.

Decisions and Adventures

The year of her adventures begins on Dec. 19, 1966, when Miss Alliluyeva flew from Moscow to New Delhi with the urn containing the ashes of Brashev Singh, the Indian whom she had met and fallen in love with three years earlier. There follow her decision not to go back to the Soviet Union, her furtive and frustrated attempts to persuade the Indian Government to allow her to stay and finally the slow birth of her decision to try the United States.

On the evening of March 6, 1967, while the Russian official colony in New Delhi was engaged in an evening of "planned entertainment," Miss Alliluyeva packed her suitcase and telephoned for a taxi. The driver took a short cut behind the Soviet Embassy and deposited her in front of the United States Embassy. She climbed the steps "unsteadily," crossed the threshold, presented "to a blue-eyed Marine" the passport that the Soviet Ambassador had imprudently returned to her that afternoon and awaited the turning of diplomatic wheels.

Then came the night flight to Rome, the six-week sanctuary in Switzerland and finally arrival in the United States, clamorous press conferences, the publication of "Twenty Letters" and the long period of adjustment among new friends.

It is a tale of some pathos and suspense, and Miss Alliluyeva spins it out with enough tension to support the baggage of reminiscences, musings, objective historical judgments and a declaration of religious faith. During her flight to India she recalls the poignant details of her brief, harassed relationship with Brashev Singh, which was frowned upon by Soviet leaders. The two-month stay at Singh's family seat in Kalahankar on the Ganges evokes a lyrically pastoral description of Indian life and the sense of relief and freedom it gave Miss Alliluyeva.

Telephone calls from Switzerland to her son and a friend in Moscow move her to a lengthy description of her life and social circle in post-Stalinist Russia, which reveals how close she was to the center of Moscow intellectual life and ferment. The publication of "Twenty Letters," and the adverse critical comments that accused her of naively misplacing the blame for her father's crimes on Lavrenti P. Beria, sets her off on a lengthy, informative, extremely tough-minded assessment of her father, which leaves us no doubt that she regards him as a "moral and spiritual monster."

More Than a Personal Tale

Finally, there are her memories of bleak, oppressive Soviet life. She summons up a strong sense of the fear, the small-mindedness and the cynicism of its rulers; the terrible corrosion of revolutionary hopes manifested in every detail of their grasping, parvenu lives (only Georgi Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev are spared her withering blasts); the gray, monolithic deadness of life within the Kremlin walls.

And by contrast, the suhburst of American life—which brings up a potential pitfall of her book. Within only one year, she suffered personal loss and stifling harassment in the Soviet Union; relief and freedom in the United States. In that same year, she saw the worst of Russia and the best of America. Moreover, she is by nature a deeply emotional and subjective woman (some readers, incidentally, will be put off by her equally emotional prose style).

It is therefore best to regard her unqualified, almost aggressively positive endorsement of American life—and, conversely, her condemnation of its critics (she has no patience with hippies, for instance)—as the uncomplicated reflection of her emotional experience. Because if her moving account of a journey out of hell is taken up as a cudgel to beat down dissent, or if it is dismissed for its overpraise of this country, a valuable historical document will be disserved.

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